

Common Ailments of Style

061 Primer Style

The Ailment: If your writing contains many short sentences, one right after another, it may sound like a grade-school textbook, or “primer.”

Our policy for makeup assignments is unfair. The teachers go strictly by the rules. They don't care about the amount of work you have. They don't care about your other activities. You must complete missing work within three school days. No credit is given after that.

The Cure: The main cure is to combine some of your ideas into longer, smoother-reading sentences. Here's the same passage revised:

When it comes to makeup assignments, our teachers go strictly by the rules. They don't care about the amount of work you have or about your other responsibilities. You must complete missing work within three school days; otherwise, you receive no credit.

062 Passive Voice

The Ailment: If your writing seems slow moving and impersonal, you may have used too many passive verbs. With passive verbs, the subject of the sentence is the receiver of the action: *The sky was struck by lightning*. Here's an example passage written in the passive voice:

Our biology teacher was greatly loved by us. He was often asked for extra help, which was always given. He was visited by his students before and after school and often was the object of our personal jokes and sincere praises.

The Cure: Unless you need a passive verb, change it to the active voice: *Lightning struck the sky*. Here is the passage written in the active voice:

We loved our biology teacher. We were always asking for extra help, and he was always willing to give it. Students often dropped in before or after school to visit, study, or play a practical joke.

063 Insecurity

The Ailment: Does your writing contain many qualifiers (*to be perfectly honest, to tell the truth*, etc.) or intensifiers (*really, truly*, etc.)? These words and phrases may suggest that you lack confidence in your ideas:

I totally and completely agree with Mr. Grim about changing the school's drug policy, but that's only my opinion.

The Cure: Visualize yourself standing before an audience and say exactly what you mean. Here is the revised example:

I agree with Mr. Grim about changing our school's drug policy.

064 Showing Versus Telling

Writer Donald Murray suggests that you put people in your writing whose actions communicate important ideas for you. Brief “slices of life” add spark to your writing. They allow you to **show** your readers something in a lively and interesting manner rather than **tell** them matter-of-factly.

Example No. 1:

In the following passage, student writer Sheila Maldonado shares a slice of life about her Coney Island (New York) neighborhood:

Under the boardwalk, a few homeless people find shelter; they hang up sheets and lay out their old clothes, empty cans, and plastic bags full of things they've collected on the streets. Even though the boardwalk doesn't provide them with walls, it does give them a roof over their heads. In the winter, they make fires on the beach and keep warm in tents. Some of them even have dogs, strays that probably approached them for food one day and stayed.

Discussion: This brief story shows us real people doing real things. It helps bring part of Coney Island alive for readers. It is much more revealing than a basic telling statement like “Some homeless people live around Coney Island.”

Example No. 2:

In this passage, professional writer Mary Anne Hoff shares the story of a visitor to her childhood home, North Dakota:

His “bee-yoo-tee-ful” stopped me short. This lanky Mr. Sophisticate from just outside Paris was describing the North Dakota prairie. The wild grasses and big sky, the black-eyed Susan and sagebrush, the hum of dog days were new to him. Now all he could say as he lay exhausted in Mother's recliner was “bee-yoo-tee-ful.”

Two days later we all huddled around a book about Paris, every picture in full color. Suddenly our guest pointed to a photo and repeated “bee-yoo-tee-ful.” It was the Champs Elysee at night. The Champs Elysee and the North Dakota prairie described with the same word? My prairie and a Parisian street linked? That was when I knew I would like him.

Discussion: Notice how much more effective this story is than a telling statement like “A visitor helped me see my North Dakota home in a new way.” All the vivid details help readers share in the experience.

65 Writing Metaphorically

A **metaphor** connects an idea or image in your writing to something new and unexpected and creates a powerful picture for your readers. (Remember that a metaphor connects two ideas without using *like* or *as*.) In the following examples, notice how the basic ideas come to life when they are stated metaphorically:

Basic Idea: My performance was a real disappointment.

Stated Metaphorically:

My performance was a real choke sandwich, all peanut butter and no jelly.

Basic Idea: Our mothers were strong.

Stated Metaphorically:

Our mothers were headragged generals. —Alice Walker

Extending a Metaphor

Sometimes a metaphor can serve as the unifying element throughout a series of sentences. Extending a metaphor in this way helps you expand or clarify an idea in your writing. You can use an **extended metaphor** to describe a scene, an event, a character, or a feeling. Notice how a metaphor (using references to cloth to describe a family reunion) is effectively extended in the following passage:

The **loose ends** of my family were **reknitted** at our July reunion. Whatever feelings had been **torn** over my older brother's divorce, whatever emotions had **frayed** over my grandmother's lingering illness, they were **mended** in a long day of boating, fishing, and board games played quietly under the river oaks.

Note • Extending a metaphor works best for special effect. If this technique is overused, it will sound forced or artificial.

Making Metaphors Work

- **Create original comparisons:** The student who wrote "Demi Moore's last movie sent me to the moon" has spent too much time gazing into space and not enough time creating fresh comparisons.
- **Be clear in your thinking:** The student who wrote "Homelessness is a thorn in the city's image" has created a confusing figure of speech. Homelessness may be a thorn in the city's side, but not in its image.
- **Be consistent:** The reporter who wrote "In the final debate, Senator Jones dodged each of his opponent's accusations and eventually scored the winning shot" has created a *mixed metaphor*. He shifts from one comparison (boxing) to another (basketball).

66 Using Strong, Colorful Words

Suppose, in your mind, you see a soaring power forward, with the ball held high in his right hand, slam home a dunk shot. Now, suppose you write "The forward scored a basket." How clearly do you think you have communicated this thought? Obviously, not very clearly. By using specific words, you can create clear and colorful word pictures for your reader.

67 Choose specific nouns: Some nouns are general (*car, jacket, animal*) and give the reader a vague, uninteresting picture. Other nouns are specific (*Mustang, aviator's jacket, raccoon*) and give the reader a much clearer, more detailed picture. In the chart that follows, the first word in each category is a general noun. The second word is more specific. Finally, each word at the bottom of the chart is clearly a specific noun. These last nouns are the type that can make your writing clear and colorful.

General to Specific Nouns

<i>person</i>	<i>place</i>	<i>thing</i>	<i>idea</i>
woman	park	drink	pain
writer	baseball park	nutritious drink	headache
Toni Morrison	Yankee Stadium	grapefruit juice	migraine

Use vivid verbs: Like nouns, verbs can be too general to create a vivid word picture. For example, the verb *looked* does not say the same thing as *stared*, *glared*, *glanced*, *peeked*, or *inspected*. The statement "Ms. Shaw *glared* at the two goof-offs" is much more vivid and interesting than "Ms. Shaw *looked* at the two goof-offs."

- Whenever possible, use a verb that is strong enough to stand alone without the help of an adverb.

Verb and adverb: Joan sat down on the couch.

Vivid verb: Joan plopped on the couch.

- Avoid overusing the "to be" verbs (*is*, *are*, *was*, *were* . . .). Also avoid overusing *would*, *could*, or *should*. Often a better verb can be made from another word in the same sentence.

A "to be" verb: Yolanda is someone who plans for the future.

A stronger verb: Yolanda plans for the future.

- Use active rather than passive verbs. (Use passive verbs only if you want to downplay who is performing the action in a sentence. See 062.)

Passive verb: Another deep pass was launched by Gerald.

Active verb: Gerald launched another deep pass.

- Use verbs that show rather than tell. (See 064.)

A verb that tells: Greta is very tall.

A verb that shows: Greta towers over her teammates.

069 Select specific adjectives: Use precise, colorful adjectives to describe the nouns in your writing. Strong adjectives can help make the nouns you choose even more interesting and clear to the reader. For example, when describing your uncle's new car as a "*sleek, red* convertible," you are using adjectives to give the reader a clearer picture of the car.

- Avoid using adjectives that carry little meaning: *neat, big, pretty, small, cute, fun, bad, nice, good, dumb, great, funny*, etc.

Overused adjective: The **neat** house on the square belongs to an architect.

Specific adjective: The **Victorian** house on the square belongs to an architect.

- Use adjectives selectively. If your writing contains too many adjectives, they will simply get in the way and lose their effectiveness.

Too many adjectives: A tall, shocking column of thick, yellow smoke marked the exact spot where the unexpected explosion had occurred.

Revised: A column of thick, yellow smoke marked the spot where the unexpected explosion had occurred.

070 Include specific adverbs: Use adverbs when you think they can help describe the action in a sentence. For example, the statement "Mayor Meyer *reluctantly* agreed to meet the protesters" is more specific than "Mayor Meyer agreed to meet the protesters." Don't, however, use a verb and an adverb when a single vivid verb would be better. (See 068.)

071 Use the "right" words: The words in your writing should not only be specific and colorful, but they should also have the right feeling, or *connotation*. The connotation of a word is what it suggests or implies beyond its literal meaning. Notice how the underlined words in the following passage connote positive, almost magical feelings about the subject, the writer's boyhood town. (Reprinted from *Good Old Boy* by Willie Morris with permission from Yoknapatawpha Press, Oxford, Mississippi.)

[Yazoo City] was a lazy town, stretched out on its hills and its flat streets in a summer sun; [it was] a dreamy place, always green and lush except for the four cold months at the beginning and end of each year. It was heavy with leafy smells, and in springtime there was a perfume in the air that made you dizzy if you breathed too much.

072 Using Repetition

Another important stylistic technique is to repeat similar grammatical structures (words, phrases, or ideas) for the purpose of rhythm, emphasis, and unity. When used effectively, **repetition** can do more to improve your style of writing than just about any other technique.

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The key point to remember when using repetition is to keep the words or ideas *parallel*, or stated in the same way. (As you read the examples below, you will see parallelism in action.)

For Rhythm and Balance: Notice in each of the sentences below how smoothly the repeated words or phrases flow from one to the next. They are in perfect balance.

The chimpanzee, the orangutan, and the baboon are three of the most intelligent subhuman primates.

My brother's room is full of **smelly sweatshirts, wrinkled shorts, and dirty socks.**

Jumal **wants to graduate from college, become a volunteer medic, and work in the African sub-Sahara.**

For Emphasis and Effect: Notice in the passages below how the repetition of a basic sentence structure adds intensity to the writing.

Dad and Mr. Harmel danced in the rain. **They waltzed cheek to cheek; they schottisched side by side; they do-si-doed arm in arm.** Because the drought had broken, the wheat would grow.

We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

—Winston Churchill

For Unity and Organization: Notice in the passage below how repetition is used to unify and organize all of the ideas. (This passage is from *The Land Remembers* by Ben Logan. Copyright © 1975 by Ben T. Logan. Reprinted by permission of Northwood Press/Heartland Press.)

Let the smell of mint touch me. I am kneeling along a little stream, the water numbing my hands as I reach for a trout. I feel the fish arch and struggle. I let go, pulling watercress from the water instead.

Let me see a certain color and I am standing beside the threshing machine, grain cascading through my hands. The seeds we planted when snow was spitting down have multiplied a hundred times, returning in a stream of bright gold, still warm with the sunlight of the fields.

Let me hear an odd whirring. I am deep in the woods, following an elusive sound, looking in vain for a last passenger pigeon, a feathered lightning I have never seen, unwilling to believe no person will ever see one again.